

The Peril of Premature Peace Parleys

An Address delivered at a Patriotic Mass Meeting of the
graduates of forty-two Colleges and Universities,
held in the Opera House, Boston, on
February 16, 1918

by

JAMES M. BECK
of the New York Bar

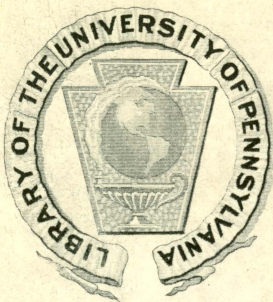
"And Peter went out and wept bitterly."

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THE PERIL OF PREMATURE PEACE PARLEYS.

An address delivered by James M. Beck, at a joint
mass meeting of graduates of leading col-
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My FELLOW CITIZENS :

I have seldom attempted to address an audience with
greater satisfaction and yet diffidence.

My satisfaction lies in the fact that this great audi-
ence, representing the graduates of many colleges and
universities, did me the great honor to invite me to ad-
dress them in this fateful hour.

My diffidence is not only the natural distrust as to
whether I can justify the compliment and "rise to the
height of the great argument" which I have in mind,
but it is a doubt as to the character of the speech, which
I should make on this occasion. If I shall follow a
line of thought, to which all in this audience would
readily assent, then I would probably discuss only
that which was obvious and commonplace. If, how-
ever, I disregard the conventional patriotic address and
express to you my innermost thoughts as to any feature
of the present fateful crisis, which gives me especial
concern, then it is altogether probable that I will say
that, to which some may not assent.

The latter course seems preferable. It is not a time
for mere patriotic self-complacency. These are indeed

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the "times that tries men's souls," and nothing is truly valuable in speech except the sincere expression of one's deepest feelings. The highest patriotism is to tell the truth, as God gives us to see the truth, and such has been my consistent purpose since the war began.

Let me introduce my theme by suggesting the very deep impression, which an article, which appeared in the current Atlantic Monthly, made upon me. It was called "And Peter Sat by the Fire Warming himself." It sought to indict that portion of the American people, to whom by reason of their exalted profession men first look for guidance in a moral crisis, with a lack of spiritual insight or courage in this greatest crisis of the modern world.

I am not here either to affirm or disaffirm that which Dr. Odell so powerfully said in the article to which I refer. I mention it only to say that, if the clergy somewhat tardily recognized, as he contends, the vital moral issues of the present crisis, then their lack of vision was no different or greater than that of all other educated men.

It is amazing to us even now, and will be increasingly astounding to posterity, that six months after Germany crossed the frontier of Belgium and desolated that unhappy country, hardly one American in a hundred thousand, and barely one educated American in ten thousand, regarded the intervention of this country into what is now so obviously a world quarrel, as even a thinkable possibility. Even after the sinking of the Lusitania, and as late as the destruction of the Sussex, it may be questioned whether the educated classes of

America were practically conscious of the imminent peril to the prestige and security of the United States.

I fully recognize the splendid discipline that the American democracy has shown in this crisis. When our Government invited us to "mark time" by observing a policy of neutrality, the great masses, without regard to acute and passionate differences of opinion, "marked time", and when our President, in his inspiring war message of April 2d, 1917, summoned the ranks of democracy to march to their destined place on the battle line, the same masses accepted the mandate with a loyal acquiescence in the Government's decision.

It is in its seeming indifference to the vital element of time in this life-and-death struggle, that the attitude of America seems still somewhat lacking in heroic spirit and makes America the Hamlet of nations, more intent upon talking about the war than working to win it. The average American fails to realize that while time once worked for the Allies, it now is running against them, for there is an obvious limitation of human endurance and resources.

Time never staged such a tragedy upon the boards of this "wide and universal theatre of man" as the present tragedy. We have run through four acts and the curtain is now about to be rung up upon the last. What the denouement is to be no one can say with certainty. The soul sickens and the mind stands aghast at the possibility that this gigantic war may end in a compromise and the millions of men who sacrificed their lives for the vindication of the holiest cause, for which men ever fought, may have died in vain.

It would not be too fanciful to draw an analogy

between the characters of the play of Hamlet and the great tragedy now being enacted.

Prussia is obviously the usurping King Claudius, who, finding mankind sleeping in the fair garden of civilization in the false security of pacifism, poured the "juice of cursed Hebenon" into the "natural gates and alleys of the body."

The better Germany, once wedded to noble ideals and exalted philosophy, but now incestuously married to Prussia, is Queen Gertrude.

Austria is that poor wretched tool, Laertes, who perishes by his own poisoned foil.

Rosencrantz and Gildernstern, who could be trusted as far as "adder's fanged," are Turkey and Bulgaria. Horatio is France, for she has been

"As one in suffering all that suffers nothing
A man that fortune's buffets and rewards
Has ta'en with equal thanks and blessed are those
Whose blood and judgment are so well commingled
That they are not a pipe for Fortune's finger
To sound what stop she pleases."

Yes, the world has taken France to her very "heart of heart," as Hamlet loved Horatio.

England is Fortinbras,

"A delicate and tender prince
Whose spirit with divine ambition puffed,
Makes mouths at the invisible event,
Exposing what is mortal and unsure
To all that fortune gets and danger dare
Even for an egg-shell. Rightly to be great
Is not to stir without great argument,
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw
When honor's at the stake."

England in that spirit staked the existence of her far-flung empire to save Belgium and France.

Russia is Polonius, ruined by its own doctrinaire folly, and now unhappily lying dead or dying behind the arras.

Belgium is the hapless Ophelia. She "knows what she is, but knows not what she may be."

Who then is the Hamlet of this tragedy? Which nation had the "scruple of thinking too precisely on the event" and thereby let go by "the important acting of the dread command."

Hamlet was a typical scholar in politics, for the tragedy of that name is a study in college life. The rooted habit of his mind was to talk about evils rather than act to redress them, and that that is also a characteristic of America to-day may be demonstrated by the fact that while there is no nation in civilization, in which so much is written and said from day to day with respect to the current issues of the hour, there is certainly no democracy in which the power of public opinion has generally less weight. In a Presidential campaign we will work ourselves to a state of intellectual frenzy about matters that seem to us vital to the perpetuity of the Republic, and on the day following the election all is forgotten as though it had never been. We take in all our problems a too academic interest, and we drop them the moment they cease to interest us. Hamlet's keen enjoyment in his rhetorical powers was also obvious. He talks to everyone from the king to the sentinel and when he has no one else to talk to, he is quite content to talk to himself. In the course of

these "rhapsodies of words" he at times castigates himself with reproaches and at times speaks in a tone of evident exultation.

For nearly three years America hesitated on the brink of the abyss, and even to-day, like Hamlet, she is parleying with the enemy to secure a "peace by accommodation" even as Hamlet parleyed with his fate.

No one can question that the peace parleys are actually in progress. It is true that the responsible diplomats are not sitting about a common table and within four walls. But in this day of the cable and the wireless, the proximity of the negotiators is a matter of minor importance.

In December, 1916, Germany formally requested her enemies to meet her in conference. She now has her wish in part, when Czernin speaks to Washington from Vienna, Hertling from Berlin, Lloyd George from London, Clemenceau from Paris, Orlando from Rome and Wilson replies from Washington. Even the dynastic rulers take the part usually allotted to diplomats and yesterday the Emperor Karl spoke from Vienna and a few days before the Kaiser from Hamburg. While this exchange of views has not progressed beyond the conventional formulas, yet they seem to constitute the preliminary parley, which may result in the near or distant future into a conventional treaty of peace, accompanied by all the solemn flummery and pompous ceremonial of such occasions.

And what then? Let us imagine the diplomats, which represent these various countries, having agreed

upon a reciprocal recognition of various formulas and covenants, returning to their own homes. Will peace be then restored? If this were merely a question as to territorial boundaries, or other economic considerations, the adjustment of the questions by the responsible statesmen of the countries would receive ready acquiescence by their peoples and the normal processes of peace would be resumed.

This war involves something infinitely higher than the ordinary incidentals of an ordinary peace problem. The great cause cannot be defined by written treaty or circumscribed by diplomatic conventions. We are dealing primarily and principally with a question of moral psychology, such as has not concerned the world since the Thirty Years war.

The actors in this drama—and the actors are the countless millions of peoples of the various nations—will not accept, at least with an acquiescent spirit, a conventional peace, if they feel that the great ends of justice are not fully satisfied. Had Shakespeare ended his *Hamlet* by an amicable parley between the usurping king and the young prince, and an agreement upon various definitions of their respective power, and a division of Norway and Denmark between themselves and Fortinbras, the tragedy would have had a pitiful anti-climax. This greater tragedy, played in this "wide and universal theatre of man," would have an even graver anti-climax, if, after the loss of ten millions of lives, Justice did not satisfy her great ends by the adequate punishment of the great criminal, through whom all this infinite woe has come upon the world.

There came to men in the early autumn of 1914, when the first sense of security had been attained by the defeat of the German army on the Marne, a heavenly vision, which was as fair as that which came to the shepherds on the hills of Bethlehem on that first of Christmas nights. That earlier vision spoke of "peace on earth to men of good will." The later vision proclaimed the same message with the added requirement of justice, without which any peace can neither be just or durable. The divine mandate of 1914 was "justice *by reparation* to men of good will and justice *by punishment* to men of ill will." Obedient to that heavenly vision, millions of men in the first flush and glory of their early manhood, went to war, not for any selfish purpose either for themselves or for their country, but to vindicate the cause of reason and justice in civilization. And let us not forget that in that goodly number of crusaders,—and there were Bayards without number who fought and bled and died "somewhere in France,"—there were also American boys, like Norman Prince and Victor Chapman, who without the protection of their own flag or the sanction of their own government, joined their comrades of England and France in an attempt to dethrone forever the Prussian Terror and to restore the reign of a liberal civilization. From the Channel to the border of Switzerland there lie forever buried these brave crusaders for the right. Their only solace and consolation in the hour of their martyrdom was their confident belief that they would not die in vain, and that the cause of justice

would, in God's good time, receive the fullest vindication.

If the great quarrel between the Central Powers and the rest of the world shall be compromised by conventional formulas and without punitive justice, then the dead will have died in vain. Such possibility fills men of vision with the gravest concern as to the portentous possibilities of the present peace parleys.

In this, I am not questioning the wholehearted purpose of President Wilson to secure a just and durable peace. His felicitously phased messages are obviously intended to concentrate the best opinion of the world against the common enemy and are masterly in their skillful dialectics.

I fully recognize that the President has an intimate knowledge of undisclosed facts that are not accessible to his fellow citizens. We must assume that he has, by reason of his larger knowledge of facts, a wider vision. He has doubtless carefully considered the grave question whether peace parleys may not demoralize the Central Powers in their present hour of temporary success far less than the temporarily baffled Allies. And yet I must recall with natural concern that the peace negotiations of 1916, with the formula of "no annexation and no indemnities" sowed the seeds of demoralization in Russia, and has so blinded that Samson, that it now contents itself by pulling down the temple of Civilization and attempting to overwhelm friend and foe in common ruin.

President Wilson, with his larger knowledge of the facts, believes that in the present peace parleys he is

developing internal revolts in Germany and Austria against their Imperial governments and is affecting the solidarity of the Dual Alliance. There is substantial ground for believing that the President's adroit diplomacy is having some results of this character, and it is within the range of possibility that a war, which has not yet been won by the skill of generals and the valor of soldiers, may be won by the diplomacy of the statesman. Time alone will tell and it is premature to pass judgment upon the wisdom of our President's skillful parleys. If he succeed, he may become the first statesman of the age and the most masterful figure in the greatest crisis of history. If he fails, and the right arm of the Allies shall be weakened by the "give and take" of this diplomatic duel, then his will be a very heavy responsibility. Our respect for his greater knowledge and larger vision makes us hope that, even though Berlin and Vienna are now decked with the flags of triumph, the present time for peace parleys may not be as unpropitious as would otherwise seem probable.

In this connection it is to be noted that the Kaiser suggests no formulas and makes no promises. Speaking a few days ago to the Burgomaster of Hamburg on the occasion of the Treaty of Peace with the Ukraine Republic, the Kaiser said with that charming and characteristic modesty which affects to give due credit to his alleged senior partner, whose habitat is Hell :

"The Lord pointed out to us by a hard school the path by which we should go. The world, however, at the same time, has not been on the right path. We Germans still have ideals,

and should work to bring about better times. We should fight for right and morality. Our Lord God wishes us to have peace, but a peace wherein the world will strive to do what is right and good. We ought to bring peace to the world. We shall seek in every way to do it. Such an end was achieved yesterday in a favorable manner with an enemy which, beaten by our armies, perceives no reason for fighting longer and extends a hand to us and receives our hand. We clasp hands. But he who will not accept peace, but on the contrary declines, pouring out the blood of his own and of our people, *must be forced to have peace.*"

And then he adds the very significant sentence :

" We desire to live in friendship with neighboring peoples, *but the victory of our German armies must first be recognized.* Our troops under the great Hindenburg will continue to win it. Then peace will come."

There is much that is practical in what the Kaiser has thus said. The best way to secure peace is to win the war. I greatly fear that until the war is won, no satisfactory terms can be arrived at by compromise. Washington, a man of few and simple ideas, who rarely expressed an opinion, either oral or written, never attempted to effect a peace with England until the triumph of Yorktown and even then not until the enemy opened negotiations with a recognition of his defeat. Ordinarily, Washington's method is the better way.

I have freely conceded that the present peace par-

leys may have a wisdom, which only those with the larger knowledge of undisclosed facts can possibly divine. We, who view this titanic conflict as a "holy war" can only stand in patient and hopeful expectancy, as the President proceeds with that which seems to him best, for upon him rests under the Constitution the initiative, although the final determination of any peace so far as our nation is concerned must rest with the Congress of the United States.

My chief concern lies in the fact that in the peace parleys there seems to be a notable *crescendo* in the note of expediency and a corresponding *diminuendo* in the note of justice.

The heavenly vision of punitive justice, which sent millions to battle in 1914 and 1915, seems to be fading from the eyes of men, even as the vision of the first Christmas night faded from the eyes of the shepherds. While the Versailles Conference very wisely contented itself with simply proclaiming a war to the end without further peace parleys, yet we no longer hear, at least insistently, either from London, Rome, Paris or Washington, the statement that the Allies will not make any peace with the arch criminals, the Hohenzollern regime. No longer do we hear that the men, who have violated international law, outraged the fundamental proprieties of civilization and have reduced the morals of the Twentieth Century in the matter of war to those of the cave dweller, shall be tried and punished. For all that appears in the recent peace parleys, when the diplomats have finally ratified a treaty and exchanged the usual polite commonplaces,

a Von Tirpitz, a Hindenburg or a Zauberschweig will be free to walk in any cafe in Paris, New York or London as though nothing had happened, for all will be formally condoned by the cessation of the war and the recognition of certain formulas, which it is believed will place civilization upon surer foundations.

Fortunately, as this is a war of peoples, so in a sense it can only be a treaty of peace by peoples, and while belligerency as a technical status may be ended by the exchange of ratifications, yet the peoples of England, France and the United States will not forget, as long as any man now lives, the shameful and countless atrocities, which have made this war the vilest and ghastliest tragedy that the world has ever known. As well might Hamlet forgive King Claudius. Those who dream that an era of fraternity will succeed the Treaty of Peace are, I think, fatuous in the extreme. The world will be a seething cauldron of hatred for decades to come, and if it be impossible through the processes of war to inflict upon the criminals, who are responsible for Germany's acts, the punishment which they so richly deserve, then they will receive that punishment in the hatred, with which they will be regarded by all peoples as long as they shall live. The condemnation of public opinion rather than that of the battlefield may be the appointed sword of justice.

I prefer to turn from the adroitly phrased peace parleys, which have come in recent weeks from some of the leaders of the Allies, to that masterful address, the greatest of his state papers, with which Woodrow Wilson called this nation to arms. I regard President

Wilson's message of April 2nd, 1917, whether measured by the felicity of his diction or its immeasurable consequences, one of the supremely great state papers of our history. Let me read in part what he then so well said :

"Our object now as then is to vindicate the principles of peace and justice in the life of the world as against selfish and autocratic power, and to set up *amongst the really free and self-governed peoples of the world* such a concert of purpose and of action as will henceforth insure the observance of those principles. * * * A steadfast concert for peace can never be maintained except by a partnership of democratic nations. No autocratic government could be trusted to keep faith within it or observe its covenants. It must be a league of honor, a partnership of opinion."

He then proceeded to arraign the Prussian autocracy as one that "was not and could never be our friend." He charged it with having filled our land with spies and criminal intrigues. He charged that the German Imperial Government

"entertains no real friendship for us and means to act against our peace and security as its convenience." * * * "We are now about to accept a gage of battle *with this natural foe to liberty* and shall if necessary spend the whole force of the nation to check and nullify its pretensions and its power."

Thus he concluded this masterful address :

"*The right is more precious than peace*, and we shall fight for the things which we have always

carried nearest our hearts,—for democracy, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own governments, for the rights and liberties of small nations, for a universal dominion of right by such a concert of free peoples as shall bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself at last free. To such a task we can dedicate our lives and our fortunes, everything that we are and everything that we have, with the pride of those who know that the day has come when America is privileged to spend her blood and her might for the principles that gave her birth and happiness and the peace which she has treasured. God helping her, she can do no other."

This was a true statement of the Heavenly vision. Let it not fade from our eyes in any passing desire for peace at almost any price.

I stand upon these statements of President Wilson as a sure foundation for the justice of our cause and the vindication of my own belief that no peace parley with this "natural foe to liberty" is possible as long as the Hohenzollern dynasty remains. The Hohenzollern should follow his cousin, the Romanoff, into oblivion.

Such was the evident meaning of President Wilson's war message. It took up the cry which until recently rang through Europe "enough of the Hohenzollerns," and applied to it the ringing declaration of Voltaire "écrasez l'infâme" (crush the monster).

Let us in this fateful hour keep constantly in mind the ominous parallel of the Seven Years' War, and in

the light of that irreparable blunder to the fact that no possible peace by accommodation could take place, leaving the Hohenzollerns on the throne, which would not leave the last state of the world worse than the first. Had the coalition of the Eighteenth Century, which had Frederick the Great beaten to his knees, simply persisted in their struggle, the Hohenzollerns would have ceased to be, and the present world war might never have taken place.

Let us not repeat that fatal error. At any cost let the Allies struggle bravely on until, as Hamlet forced the poison down the throat of the guilty king, so the Allies can commend to the Kaiser the same bitter potion that he commended to them in his speech, which I have already quoted, namely, that we will discuss peace with his people, *not with him*, when the victory of the Allies is first clearly recognized.

The question arises above all diplomatic formulas and international conventions. It is a question of moral psychology. Unless the Prussian is beaten and knows that he is beaten, all the dead will have died in vain, for even if a treaty of peace could be secured at this time that would be wholly favorable to the Allies, but which left the Hohenzollern on his throne, as soon as Germany had recuperated its strength, as Prussia did under Frederick the Great, the life and death struggle between liberalism and slavery would be renewed.

If we are to have a liberal civilization, there is no room for the Hohenzollern in it. With him or his brood on the throne the rule of reason will cease in international affairs and the only right will be that of the

powers of chemistry. In that event civilization will be a hell in which the Kaiser and his successor will sit as overlords.

Assuming that this be true, it may be asked what prospect is there that any favorable issue of this titanic struggle can be attained. Time does not permit me to go into this, but I might venture my confident belief that if the Allies shall simply have a faith and endurance worthy of their great destinies that sooner or later their enemies will be beaten to their knees. They have a manifest superiority in man power and material resources. They have a just cause. Why should they give up the fight? But whether this expectation be justified or not, there is nothing for the Allies to do but to press on in their terrible task. For I verily believe that it would be better for civilization to end in the Ragnarok, or "twilight of the gods," like ancient Valhalla, than for it to continue "half slave and half free" with a Prussian Kaiser as the dominating influence.

We Americans know that we too had dark hours in our own terrible struggle for existence and in the third year of that war there were many, who sought to parley with the Southern Confederacy and to make the peace of compromise. But Abraham Lincoln would not have it so, and his words, spoken over half a century ago in his second inaugural address, can be quoted with fitting propriety to the present crisis :

"Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet if God wills that it continue

until all the wealth piled by the bondsmen's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said 'The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.' "

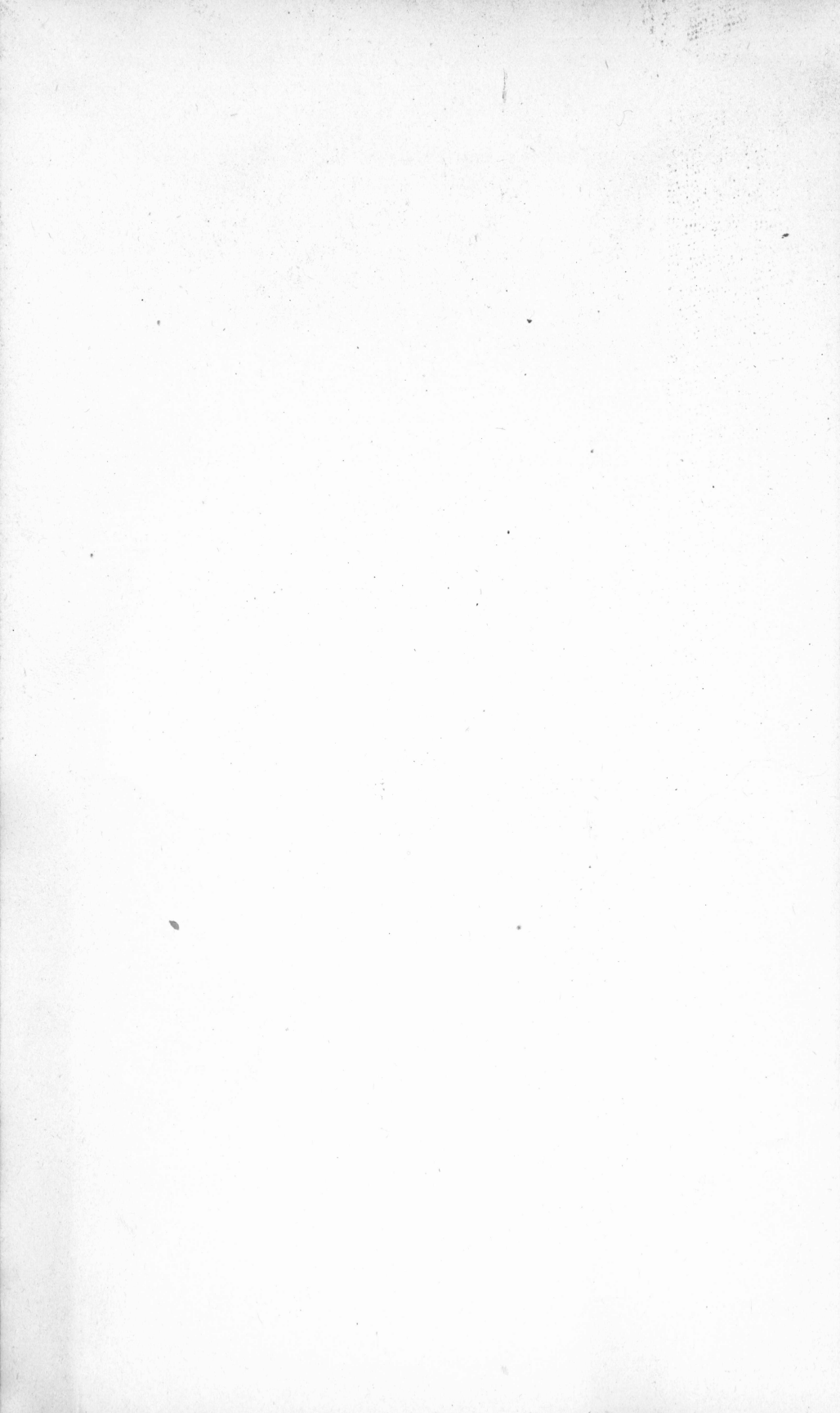
" And Peter sat by the fire warming himself."

Let us remember the sequel, for when the cock crew, "Peter went out and wept bitterly."

America delayed entering into the war for nearly three years, and only the Future will tell whether it did not enter too late. *Too late!* Merciful Heaven, what a fate that would be for our country! It may be, and probably is, still within our power to be the determining factor in this life-and-death struggle, and thereby to become the first power in the world. To achieve this great destiny, America must not "sit by the fire warming itself," nor must it content itself with mere tears.

The hour is fateful and could not well be blacker. The Teuton cock is loudly crowing. A liberal civilization is ascending its Calvary, and within the near future, possibly within a few months, it may be determined whether at the point of a Prussian spear, it may not cry: "It is finished."

Should this frightful catastrophe come to pass, should this supreme betrayal of a holy cause mark the end of the conflict, then indeed Peter, or America, which from the beginning might have prevented the common ruin, may well "go out and weep bitterly."



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